

Legislative Program Review and Investigation Committee

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SCOPE OF STUDY

State Parks and Forests: Funding

Focus

The study focus is on state funding for state parks and forests. It will compare park/forest use and revenue trends to funding levels and overall system expenditures. An assessment of whether funding has been adequate to support short- and long-term operational needs of parks and forests will be made.

Background

The Department of Energy and Environmental Protection is permitted by state law to acquire, maintain, and make available to the public open spaces for recreation. State forests were first established in Connecticut in 1903 and state parks in 1914. At present, there are 107 state parks and 32 state forests covering roughly 8 percent (262,600 acres) of the state's area. An estimated 8.5 million people visited state parks last year.

Funding sources for state parks and forests vary across states. Connecticut relies mainly on its General Fund for the acquisition, operation, preservation, and enhancement of state parks and forests, which can be an inconsistent funding source.¹ Some other states have dedicated funds or revenue streams beyond park-based revenues (e.g., parking fees, campground rentals, and hunting and fishing licenses and permits.) It also appears Connecticut may rely more heavily on seasonal workers than other states, in part because of fewer full-time staff. Any decrease in staffing and/or funding may result in deferred resource maintenance, leading to a decline in park and forest use, resource value, revenue generation, and overall economic contribution.

State parks and forests not only enhance the overall quality of life within the state, but they contribute to Connecticut's economy. A 2011 study by the Connecticut Center for Economic Analysis of the economic impact of state parks and forests noted the economic effect of expenditures associated with the state's parks and forests, and the economic value people derive from such resources, both vastly exceed the annual cost to the state to maintain its parks and forests. The study estimates the economic value of state park- and forest-related tourism was \$544 million in 2010, with additional economic impact from park-related activities (e.g., fishing and hunting) and increased value of properties near state parks and forests.

¹ Public Act 10-3 created nonlapsing, park-specific accounts within the General Fund for revenues generated from short-term rentals at such parks (e.g., wedding receptions, pavilion rentals). In addition, some capital funding is provided through state bonds.

Areas of Analysis

- 1) Explain the process used by the state to acquire and designate an area as a state park or forest.
 - a. Determine the growth over time in the number and location of acres in the system.
 - b. Categorize how state park and forest land has been obtained (i.e., direct purchase, donation, or other).
- 2) Describe and assess the state's management and oversight of its park and forest system.
- 3) Determine what short- and long-term planning efforts regarding state parks' operation and improvement have been developed and implemented.
 - a. Identify any assessments of park property and the overall value of such property.
 - b. Determine related, ongoing maintenance costs, and capital improvement projects/costs.
- 4) Examine the public use of state parks and forests, the degree to which use has changed over time, and any impact use has had on park expenses. In particular, determine who is using parks and forests (e.g., state versus non-state residents), and park visitor noncompliance with safety and maintenance rules (e.g., swimming in nondesignated areas, and not following "carry in-carry out.") Outline how DEEP monitors and addresses conflicting park uses, such as bird-watching, beach-going, and all-terrain vehicle use.
- 5) Analyze the finances of the state park and forest system, including funding levels and sources, revenue generation, the use of special passes, the pursuit and use of non-state funding, and the possibility of a flexible fee structure for shifting park use; also examine operation and improvement expenditures.
- 6) Compare Connecticut's level and types of staff resources used to manage and operate state parks and forests with other states.
- 7) Examine whether funding and staffing levels are adequate for achieving the current and short- and long-term goals of the state park system.
- 8) Assess the possible correlation of state park and forest funding, staffing, use, and revenue generation.
- 9) Describe the role of park advocacy groups and, to the extent possible, estimate the amount and value (in-kind and financial) of their contributions to state parks.
- 10) Ascertain how state parks in other states are funded, and consider whether any of those methods may be beneficial and applicable to Connecticut.

Areas Not Under Review

The study will not examine the economic impact of state parks and forests.

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